

Clam Lake Elk News [Fourth Quarter—October through December, 2005]

Current Status: Taking into consideration the 3 mortalities observed this quarter the number of elk in the Clam Lake herd is down to about 108 elk. We're currently only about ¾'s the way through the current "elk year" (from start of calving in mid May to the start of calving season the next mid May) and we've already observed 13 mortalities. Up to this same period last year we observed 5 elk mortalities (however, the last ¼ of the previous elk (04/05) year we experienced 9 mortalities).

Elk Research on the Clam Lake Herd: Still no word on the results of UW Madison's grant application to investigate wolf/elk predator prey relationships. Drs. Monica Turner and Dean Anderson sought to obtain funding to GPS radio collar both elk and wolves and then map out interactions over the next 2 years. UW Stevens Point has initiated the start of their liver fluke/brain worm/elk investigation. Department elk project staff have collected 3 adult elk livers from investigated mortalities this past November and December. We will be collecting elk feces at select sites throughout the winter and otherwise assisting wherever and whenever we can.

Elk Health Issues: On November 15, department elk project Staff received a call from the Ashland County Sheriff's Department that a bull had been hit at 1:30 am by a logging truck east of Clam Lake on STH 77. We investigated and found Bull 130 (a 2.5 year old bull dead on the south side of the road). A field necropsy confirmed that he had been hit by a large vehicle. We salvaged what meat we could for donation to the Sawyer County Food Pantry and collect our standard tissue samples to assess health status.

On November 21, while conducting a mortality check in the Clam Lake area department elk project staff were approached by a hunter who claimed to have accidentally shot an elk cow. Law enforcement was contacted and met with the project staff and the hunter. An investigation determined that the hunter had not confirmed his target was a deer and shot Cow 12. He was also hunting over bait in excess of the 2 gallon limit. Most frustrating was that around the bait were numerous elk tracks and feces. The hunter, an elderly man, admitted to have been hunting in this area for 20 years and was aware of the presence of elk. Those present reported that he was very contrite and had proclaimed that he was going to quit deer hunting altogether. He received more than \$1600 in fines for shooting the elk and hunting over bait in excess of 2 gallons. The meat from Cow 12 was salvaged, processed and donated to the Sawyer County Food Pantry. Of special note is that Cow 12 was 12½ years old and had produced calves M35, F54, F70, M90, F113, M131, and M149. Both of her offspring F54 and F113 had produced calves in 2005. Indications were that Cow 12 was still a producing cow and was pregnant at the time of her death.

On December 16, elk project staff were called by the Sawyer County Sheriff's Department regarding a bull killed by a vehicle west of Clam Lake on STH 77. Elk staff conducted an investigation and found Bull 149 dead on the north side of STH 77. We did a necropsy that verified that Bull 149 had been hit by a vehicle, took tissue samples, but were unable to salvage the meat. We moved the carcass to prevent further collisions of other wildlife.

Other elk health issues. We track elk mortality on an “elk year basis.” An elk year begins with Calving Season in May and runs to the start of the next Calving Season. Roughly speaking this runs from mid-May to mid-May the next year.

Comparing mortality from mid-May 2003 to mid-May 2004 (4 verified elk mortalities) with the mortality from mid-May 2004 to mid-May 2005 (14 verified elk mortalities), we saw a 350% increase in elk mortality. Our anxiety grew as the 04/05 elk year progressed, since mortalities accelerated from January through March (9 verified mortalities) during this period of the season. Our immediate response was “how do we prevent these deaths!”

Careful analysis of those 14 deaths indicate that possibly 12 of them could be related to artificial feeding. These included 3 drownings, 2 vehicle collisions, 3 liver fluke complications, 2 brain worm complications and 2 wolf killed calves. Our advantage in analyzing these deaths is that we have radio telemetry information on all of these animals, in some cases for several years back to their birth. This knowledge, along with knowledge of human activity in the area, gives us confidence in these analyses. We reported these findings to the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation Project Advisory Committee, the WDNR Elk Advisory Committee and were requested to report to the Natural Resources Board on this issue at their October 26 meeting.

Reviewing this information, these parties gave us their support for our efforts to enhance protection of this young elk herd. Proposed efforts include additional road signage warning motorists in areas of frequent crossings, flashing warning lights in those areas, an intensive education program asking for local cooperation on ceasing deer and elk feeding (and informing the local public that it is illegal to feed elk) and greater enforcement monitoring of elk feeding activities.

The road signs and flashing lights have been placed. During the first half of November we conducted a blanket mailing out of the Clam Lake Post Office to all mail recipients with information detailing the problem and asking for their assistance by not feeding elk in the Clam Lake area. Both elk project staff and Conservation Wardens visited local residents in an effort to provide information regarding the impacts of artificial feeding. Conservation Wardens have conducted aerial flights monitoring elk feeding activities and elk project staff continue to monitor elk telemetry information relative to human interactions. The overall response by residents has been favorable—most have ceased their recreational feeding activity. It’s gratifying to see this tangible expression of the care the Clam Lake Community has for their elk! It is our hope that the Clam Lake community will continue to exhibit this high degree of care for their elk; however, there continue to be a few bad actors. In those cases the ground work has been prepared for increased enforcement action. Conservation Wardens have received commitments, from County District Attorneys in the counties involved, that the District Attorneys will prosecute if elk feeding cases are submitted by law enforcement (it is illegal to feed elk). It is our hope that this will not be necessary.

As a result of these activities and the media and public response we have received approval to place “suggested safe speeds” on the warning signs in the core elk crossing area; there have been requests for increased speed limit enforcement. Response of our request for enforcement of existing speed limits is still pending.

Furthermore, related to these elk health concerns Drs. Tim Ginnett and Shelly Dubay have received RMEF grant approval to initiate a research project of brain worm and liver fluke parasite issues and impacts on the Clam Lake elk herd (reported in previous quarterly reports). This research is due to begin in 2006.

Public Education: During this quarter we gave 8 elk presentations to 175 participants, which included a presentation to the Natural Resources Board on October 26. We also gave 6 interviews to reporters from the print media and 3 to radio reporters.

Partnerships: We have ongoing partnerships with the RMEF and US Forest Service. As described above we've increased cooperative efforts with WDNR Conservation Wardens on our "feeding" education program.

Monitoring: During this quarter we made 728 telemetry location determinations and 1,456 telemetry mortality checks (mortality plus locations).

Winter of 2005/2006 Elk Trapping: We successfully pre-baited and set up the elk trap on the National Forest on December 16. Two subsequent attempts were foiled by interference by private individuals. This interference is under investigation. Such interference can result in fines upwards to \$1,000 and/or 60 days in jail. If anyone has information that may assist in the prosecution of the parties involved, please contact Laine Stowell at 715-634-9658 ext. 3527. Obviously, such interference can seriously impact the WDNR's elk management and the safety and well-being of the elk. Interference with trapping efforts may be done out of concern for the elk, but our trapping effort has a very good safety record. Since I began in July of 2000, no elk calves or trapped elk have died while we've handled them, and we've only had one spike bull die after handling due to health complications. This was a spike bull that had an excessive case of liver fluke infestation that prevented it from properly attenuating the immobilization drugs. An attending veterinarian that conducted the necropsy concluded that the extent of liver damage would have caused this bull's death soon regardless of the handling event. The bull had over 90% of its liver destroyed by liver flukes causing the liver to adhere to the bull's diaphragm.

Abnormally warm temperatures are reducing our ability to make captures. We're hoping for more normal conditions so we can still capture about 30 animals before mid-March.

Upcoming Events: During the next quarter we will continue our trapping effort. We hope for 3 or 4 captures to obtain a total of about 30 animals so we can upgrade or replace old collars, collar a few additional uncollared animals and take blood samples to further monitor the health of the Clam Lake elk herd. During this next quarter we will also continue monitoring the recreational feeding activities in order to protect the health of the herd and we'll be developing elk habitat projects for 2006.

| Laine Stowell & Matt McKay, January 10, 2006.